

**Art Exhibitions as a Tool of American Cultural Diplomacy
towards Poland, 1956-2016**

(Wystawy sztuki jako narzędzie amerykańskiej dyplomacji kulturalnej
wobec Polski w latach 1956-2016)

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Summary of the dissertation thesis

This dissertation is an attempt to explore the role and usage of culture, especially visual arts, in international relations. Nowadays various products of culture surround us both in private and public lives with no exception of politics. It has been a long time since different actors on the international scene have harnessed art in various forms in order to assert their prestige and power.

There has been a quest ever since to measure the effectiveness of such activities, embraced under the common term of cultural diplomacy. Despite unfruitful efforts in that matter states, organizations, institutions, corporations or even private individuals still engage visual arts to suit, strengthen and legitimize their actions.

It was Joseph S. Nye (*Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Basic Books, 1990, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 2004) who first applied theoretical approach to the subject of culture within a framework of international relations and quest for power. Nye proposed to compliment military and economic (hard) powers with promotion of values and cultural achievements (which he calls “soft power”). Also Alexander

Wendt in his constructivist theory underlines the crucial role of ideas and identity of states in shaping the international environment.

Otherwise cultural diplomacy is a neglected tool of public diplomacy, both in theory as in practice. United States (US) have made great use of promoting its art abroad during the Cold War, but as soon as it ended funding for cultural activities was cut. “The golden years of cultural diplomacy began to fade four decades ago... Meanwhile, the sharp rise in foreign non-understanding has become a national nightmare. Yet few have suggested that a crippled cultural diplomacy might have anything to do with either cause or cure. Cultural diplomacy’s decline has thus passed unnoticed, leaving a nation baffled by its apparent defenselessness against the cultural onslaught of an enraged Islamic fragment.”¹

Treating Richard Arndt’s explanation as the starting point this research the author found it crucial to test and refine Nye’s soft power theory based on empirical research. American cultural diplomacy towards Europe has been analyzed quite thoroughly in the areas of film and music. The author decided to focus on art and art exhibition as tools of diplomacy, as it is a sphere not yet fully discovered. As cultural diplomacy is gaining on importance it is crucial to analyze the past activities in order to properly design the new, upcoming ones.

Despite modern international relations’ theories pushing cultural activities to the second row - as realism promoted military power, and liberalism - economic advantages, art has always been present in diplomatic relations. It has been one of the first cultural elements used for political purposes (bearing gifts, art as a symbol of power and wealth). What is more nowadays, in the era of visual modes of communication, it seems crucial to research the relation between visual art and international relations. Diplomats and politicians are likely to make more and more use of visual images in order to strengthen their pledges.

This thesis’ aim was to analyze how the United States made use of art (in the form of art exhibitions) as a tool of cultural diplomacy towards Poland in the years 1956-2016. Time frame

¹ Richard Arndt, *First Resort of the Kings. American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, Washington D.C. 2005, p. xxi

is dictated by the political situation in Poland, in the years 1945-1956 public diplomacy activities of any Western country were very limited by the Stalinist government. The end of the Stalinist era in 1956 has enabled to penetrate Poland in a cultural sense by presenting the artistic achievements of the American nation to the Polish public. First exhibitions of American photography took place in 1959 (*The Family of Men* and *American Spirit- America in Photography*). Exhibitions researched range from *The Family of Men* which started its tour in 1956 to the exhibition of Frank Stella, presented in 2016.

The Americans viewed Poland as the USSR's "window to the West" - a territory under Soviet influence, but nominally independent. It was also known that Poles were favorable towards Western values, thus they craved any contact with Western culture - American music, films and art were functioning as symbols of freedom and democracy.

Jolanta Szymkowska - Bartyzel's created a concept of "imagined America" (2015) - the collective idea Poles had of the United States. The concept is based on popular culture. American popular culture was spread in Poland by individuals (sending or bringing consumer products) and private corporations (Hollywood, tv, music industry). All those experiences shaped Polish reactions to American art. This vision has of course changed with time and new elements of (mainly popular) culture reaching Poland, both via official and private channels. Hence the author believed, American art had a bearing on Polish society not only due to cultural diplomacy actions, but also thanks to popular culture and private sector, as anticipated.

The author wished to discover the patterns in American public diplomacy decision making process regarding cultural diplomacy in the form of art exhibitions towards Poland. Thus, the author sought to find out what the US government had planned to achieve in Poland by organizing art exhibitions and also how were they received. Many praise the US for a carefully planned cultural diplomacy strategy (especially during the Cold War), the author believes in fortuitousness of those activities and hence, wished to show the need for an agenda.

The aim was to focus both on bureaucratic processes of US decision making while organizing art exhibitions in Poland and on the impact those decisions had on the audience (reception of the exhibitions). Decision making process in American Foreign Policy has been profoundly researched by Graham T. Allison (1969) on the basis of Cuban Missile Crisis from 1962. Allison presented three models of government behavior: 1) The "Rational Actor" Model; 2) The "Organizational Process" Model; 3) The "Governmental Politics" Model. The first model describes a government as unitary actor, who always chooses the solution with most advantages, with the highest payoff. The "Organizational Process" Model states that the decision is usually not made while looking comprehensively at the whole situation, but rather by splitting it into various assignments which are usually solved according to pre-determined procedures. Finally, the last model is often compared to "palace politics", stating that bureaucracy employees have their own agenda besides the common goal, which highly influences their decisions and behavior, thus affecting the final outcome. Public diplomacy is best described by the third model, as different agencies, organizations and individuals have a saying in its shape - which also varies dependent on the country the activities are aimed at. The third, "Governmental Politics" model in analysis of foreign policy has served as an example and inspiration to create schemes presenting organizational models of the researched exhibitions.

The author argues that during the Cold War it was the USIA who had the leading role in initiating and organizing American art exhibitions in Poland, supported by the embassy officers, nowadays the roles of the embassy and the host-museums in Poland have a greater influence on the shape of the shows. Additionally, the author presumed that special American-Polish relations, dictated by history, Polish diaspora in the US and less intensive anti-American propaganda (during the communism period), as also the concept of Poles' "imagined America" had a bearing on the shape of US public diplomacy towards Poland in the form of art exhibitions in the years 1956-2016.

This research encompasses all of the American art exhibitions in Poland after World War II (thus all the American art exhibitions in general), however detailed analytical tools have been applied to six chosen shows - three from the Cold War period: *200 years of American Painting (200 lat Malarstwa Amerykańskiego)*, Warsaw 1976; *Willem de Kooning & Robert Rauschenberg*, Warsaw and Cracow 1978; *The 70's: New American Painting (Lata Siedemdziesiąte: Nowe Malarstwo Amerykańskie)*, Toruń and Warsaw 1980/81; and three from the 21st century: *Faces of America. Portraits from the Collection of the Terra Foundation for American Art 1770–1940 (Twarze Ameryki: Portrety z kolekcji Terra Foundation for American Art 1770–1940)*, Cracow 2006; *American Dream (Amerykański sen)* - part of the “America, America...” museum project comprising six exhibitions, Cracow 2009; *Frank Stella and the Synagogues of Historic Poland*, Warsaw 2016.

The case study exhibitions have been analyzed with the use of Judith Balfe's method. In her article from 1987 (“Artworks as Symbols in International Politics”, [in:] *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Volume 1, Issue 2 , p. 5-27) she presents a research method applied in her study of foreign exhibitions shown in the US. It encompasses a detailed analysis of the exhibition based on: a) agenda, interests and motives of the country/government presenting the show; b) aesthetic value of the shown art pieces; c) exhibition target group; d) mode of presentation and exhibition reception. Balfe analyzed foreign exhibitions touring the United States and their reception by the critics, elites and wider audience - the author has applied the same method to analyze American shows in Poland.

Deepened analysis of the exhibitions in the political context of the time they were presented in and comparison of the organizational models of the exhibitions from the different periods had enabled the verification of the theses posed by the dissertation.

Detailed research of the six American art exhibitions in Poland has predominantly shown that active engagement of the US government in cultural diplomacy was usually stimulated by a crisis or the presence of a great enemy. Thus American art exhibitions as tools of cultural diplomacy have been mainly applied during the Cold War period (in USSR and the rest of Europe) and are getting on popularity today in the Middle East and Arab world in general. The Allison's model that has been applied is the crisis model. Thus it turned out to be more accurate in the Cold War period than it is now, when decisions are mainly taken in Poland.

Second pattern that emerged during the survey is that American cultural diplomacy in the form of art exhibitions in Poland has not been planned with a greater agenda. It was rather a resultant of different factors:

- current political relations with the USSR;
- current political situation in Poland and American-Polish relations;
- amount of pressure coming from the American embassy in Poland;
- availability of a touring exhibition organized generally for Europe; and/or
- “target of opportunity” created by a Polish institution.

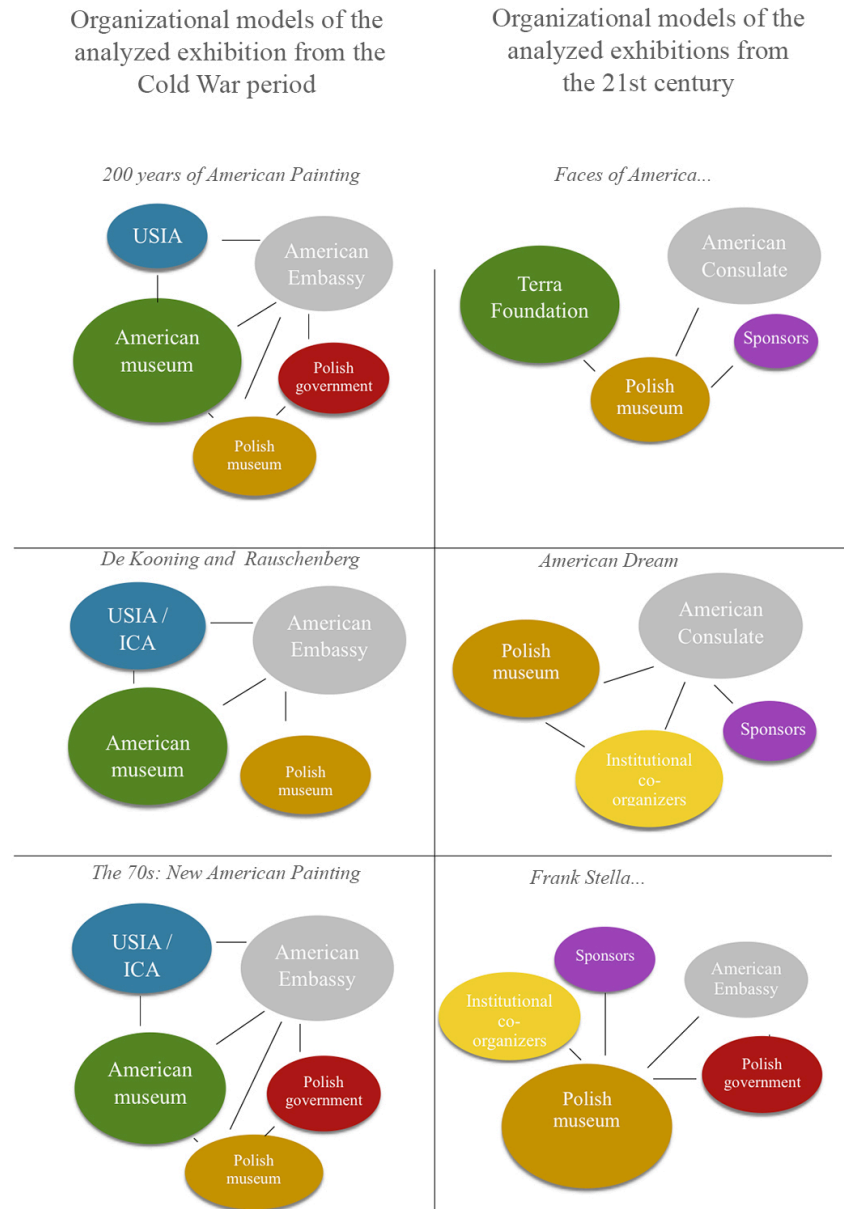
US government has seen the need of presenting American art to European audiences already in the 1930s. However, at the beginning of the Cold War those efforts were stopped by the scandal concerning modern American art in the United States. This led to scattered efforts in the area of arts rather than one coordinated plan. One can discuss whether those scattered efforts (often successful) may be called cultural diplomacy. Diplomacy, by definition, is a coordinated and planned activity. Taking into consideration the requests from Poland as being the main ignition for organizing the exhibitions, one can risk the conclusion that American art exhibitions in Poland were not used as tools of cultural diplomacy (no agenda and expected outcome), although they turned out to have brought similar effects.

Nowadays, besides the continuous lack of any agenda in cultural diplomacy towards Poland, the organizational model have additionally changed. Main organizational parties became Polish museums and galleries, even the Polish state. Although state involvement is not crucial to call an activity cultural diplomacy, probably it should at least involve an entity from the country being represented - US in this case.

This study enables us to conclude that American art exhibitions in Poland are soft power tools, rather than tools of cultural diplomacy. Thus one can not even state that American art exhibitions worked strictly as an element of cultural diplomacy only till the end of the Cold War, as foreseen in the introduction.

What the study has confirmed, is the influence of special American-Polish relations and Poland's unique situation ("the window to the West") on American cultural activities conducted in Poland. Apart from the historic links and a great Polish diaspora in the US, also personal relations played a great role. Many of the USIA and embassy officers were of Polish decent (for example Leonard Baldyga) and so they fought stronger and more effectively for what Polish audience craved. And the craving was mostly derived from the "imagined America" concept. The notion still influences American art exhibitions today, as they are mainly initiated on the Polish side. American artist is usually a "recipe" for high attendance and press coverage. At the same time younger curators in smaller museums and galleries are aware of contemporary American art potential and so they try to convey new visions, but still making use of positive connotations of the "imagined America" concept.

Graph 1. Models presenting the organizational method of American art exhibitions in Poland during the Cold War and in the 21st century



Author's organizational models have proven the assumption that during the Cold War USIA and embassy officers were the main powers behind organizing the shows in Poland, today, in the 21st century, it is the host-museum in Poland which has the greatest influence on the shape of the shows. Additionally, after 1989 motivation for cultural activities has shifted significantly to the Polish side. The study also proved that cultural activities towards Poland were intensified during the 1970s and have fallen rapidly after the end of the Cold War.

The conclusions presented in this dissertation are in accord with Milton Cummings' patterns in American cultural diplomacy², what raises the credibility of both studies.

Richmond Yale argues that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism were consequences of Soviet contacts and exchanges with the United States, at a cost that was minuscule in comparison with expenditures for defense and intelligence over the same period of time.³ This study proves the efficacy of art exhibitions in Poland as elements of American soft power. Surely one can not say that the art shows broke the Iron Curtain, but they helped to establish a stronger link with the Western world and its values of democracy what in the end resulted in combating communism in Poland.

² Milton Cummings, "Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey", Center for Arts and Culture, 2003

³ Richmond Yale, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War. Raising the Iron Curtain*, Pennsylvania 2003, p. XIV